

**METHOD TO PRODUCE STRESS-FREE OPTICAL WAVEGUIDES TO REDUCE
STRESS-INDUCED BIREFRINGENCE IN PLANAR LIGHTWAVE CIRCUIT
(PLC) DEVICES**

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to optical planar lightwave circuit (PLC) device fabrication and more specifically to methods of forming waveguides.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

A major cause of stress-induced birefringence is the stresses in the optical waveguides resulting from the mismatch in the thermal expansion coefficients between the substrate and the waveguide material(s). This causes the refractive index and the light propagation properties to be dependent upon the direction of polarization and hence polarization dependent loss.

Conventional methods to reduce the stress in waveguides involve using substrate material with thermal expansion coefficients closely matching that of the core.

U.S. Publication No. 2002/0074308 A1 to Beguin describes a method of manufacturing a planar waveguide with a core and overclad layers.

U.S. Publication No. 2002/0097962 A1 to Yoshimura et al. describes single and multilayer waveguides and processes to fabricate them.

U.S. Patent No. 6,421,472 B1 to Morani et al. describes an athermalized polymer overclad integrated planar optical waveguide device and method.

U.S. Patent No. 5,612,171 to Bhagavatula describes planar optical waveguides with planar optical elements.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Accordingly, it is an object of one or more embodiments of the present invention to provide a method of forming waveguides having reduced stress gradients.

Other objects will appear hereinafter.

It has now been discovered that the above and other objects of the present invention may be accomplished in the following manner. Specifically, a structure is provided. An underclad layer is formed over the structure and a core layer is formed over the underclad layer. Patterning the core layer to form the waveguide; and partially into the underclad layer, forming an overetched underclad layer having a projection underneath the waveguide. The waveguide having stress gradients and the overetched underclad layer having stress gradients.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention will be more clearly understood from the following description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings in which like reference numerals designate similar or corresponding elements, regions and portions and in which:

Figs. 1 and 2 schematically illustrate a method of forming a waveguide used for stress modeling.

Figs. 3 and 4 illustrate x and y stress contours for the waveguide of Fig. 2.

Figs. 5 and 6 are respective plots of σ_{xx} , σ_{yy} and $(\sigma_{xx} - \sigma_{yy})$ at: the center of the waveguide of Fig. 2; and at the edge of the waveguide of Fig. 2.

Figs. 1, 7 and 8 illustrate the preferred embodiment of the present invention in forming a waveguide having an underclad layer overetch.

Figs. 9 and 10 are x and y stress contours for the waveguide of Figs. 7 and 8 having an underclad layer overetch in accordance with the method of the present invention.

Figs. 11 and 12 are respective plots of σ_{xx} , σ_{yy} and $(\sigma_{xx} - \sigma_{yy})$ at: the center of the waveguide of Figs. 7 and 8 having an underclad layer overetch; and at the edge of the waveguide of Figs. 7 and 8 having an underclad layer overetch in accordance with the method of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

Method/Problem Known to the Inventors - Not to be Considered Prior Art for the Purposes of the Present Invention

Planar Lightwave Circuit (PLC) is the technology of constructing optical devices on substrates similar to making semiconductor devices or magnetic heads. Optical waveguides of silica are formed on either silica substrates or silicon substrates. Such optical waveguides are generally rectangular in shape and are formed by employing an etching process such as, for example, a reactive-ion etch (RIE) process.

The PLC process begins with the deposition of a layer of underclad material on the substrate followed by a layer of core material. A pattern of waveguides of the optical device to be formed is etched into the core layer, preferably by using a mask. The overclad material is then deposited to fill the space around the waveguides and also to provide a layer on top of the waveguides. The refractive index of the core layer is generally higher than that of the underclad material, while the refractive index of the overclad material closely matches that of the underclad material.

During film deposition and subsequent annealing steps, thermal stresses develop in the various layers due to the mismatch in the thermal expansion values between the substrate and the layer materials, i.e. the underclad material

layer/core layer/overclad material layer. Of particular interest are the stresses created in the core layer since the waveguides are formed in the core layer.

In the instance of using a silicon substrate, since the thermal expansion coefficient of the silicon substrate is higher than that of the silica core, the stress in the plane of the silica core film is large and compressive whereas the stress in the direction normal to that plane is small. The stress difference in these two directions causes the refractive index values to be different resulting in stress-induced birefringence. The wave propagation constants will be different depending upon the direction of polarization of the wave making the device polarization sensitive. The birefringence or the polarization sensitivity is undesirable for most optical devices.

Simulations Conducted by the Inventors for Stress Modeling

Figs. 1 to 6 illustrate a method and simulations conducted by the inventors for stress modeling and are not to be considered as prior art against the present invention.

Common Initial Structure - Fig. 1

Fig. 1 illustrates a substrate 10 having an underclad layer 12 formed thereupon and a core layer 14 form upon the underclad layer 12. Thermal stresses in the layers 10, 12, 14 were calculated using Finite ElementTM simulations

made/sold by ANSYS Inc., 27S Technology Drive, Cannonsburg, Pennsylvania 15317.

Substrate 10 is preferably comprised of silicon, silicon oxide, glass or GaAs and is more preferably silicon. Underclad layer 12 is preferably comprised of silica or GaAsP and is more preferably silica. Core layer/film 14 is preferably comprised of: silica; Ge doped silica; or B, P and Ge doped silica; and is more preferably silica.

The approximate thicknesses and mechanical properties of the various layers 10, 12, 14 used in these simulations are as follows in Table I:

TABLE I

Layer	Thickness	Coefficient of thermal expansion	Elastic modulus	Poisson's ratio
Substrate 10	1.00 mm	$4 \times 10^{-6}/^{\circ}\text{C}$	130,000 MPa	0.27
Underclad 12	15.00 μm	$0.5 \times 10^{-6}/^{\circ}\text{C}$	73,000 MPa	0.17
Core 14	6.00 μm	$1 \times 10^{-6}/^{\circ}\text{C}$	73,000 MPa	0.17

For silica waveguides, the devices are annealed at about 1080°C. When cooled down to room temperature, the temperature delta for thermal stresses therefore is -1060°C. Since the thermal expansion coefficient of the substrate 10 is greater than that of the underclad layer 12 and the core layer 14, at room temperature the wafer will have a bow that is convex as viewed from the core film

side. The calculated in-plane (xz plane) (the z axis is perpendicular to the paper) stress in the core film 14 after annealing was determined to be about 287 MPa (compressive) and in the underclad layer 12 it was about 321 MPa (compressive). These in-plane stresses are constant throughout the films 12, 14 except in small regions near the wafer edge. The normal stress (y direction) is very small.

Formation of Waveguide 20 - Fig. 2

Fig. 2 illustrates a cross-sectional view of a single waveguide pattern for the optical device etched in the core layer 14 which the inventors used for stress modeling. The waveguide 20 (formed from patterning the core film 14 of Fig. 1) is about 6 μm wide and the light propagation direction is in the z-direction which is normal to the plane of Fig. 2. As the core film material from the core film 14 is removed during patterning/etching, the bow of the wafer will be significantly reduced although the stresses will remain high. In fact, the maximum stress in the waveguide 20, which occurs at the underclad-waveguide interface 22, is actually increased due to stress concentration at the interface 22. While the wafer bow is undesirable due to wafer handling concerns during subsequent processing, the stress in the waveguide 20 actually affects the optical performance due the stress-optics effects.

The inventors have determined that the stresses in the waveguide 20 are significantly changed from the full-film stress due to the free surfaces created during etching. This stress has three (3) components (σ_{xx} , σ_{yy} and σ_{zz}) along the

three (3) respective axes (x, y and z). These components approximately equal the 3 principal stresses.

Stress Contours of σ_{xx} and σ_{yy} in the Waveguide 20 - Figs. 3 and 4

Figs. 3 and 4 show stress contours of σ_{xx} and σ_{yy} , respectively, for the waveguide of Fig. 2. The stress contours σ_{xx} , σ_{yy} , are shown for the waveguide 20 and for a small region of the underclad layer 12 at the interface 22. As illustrated in Figs. 3 and 4, the stresses are very high at, and near, the underclad-waveguide interface 22 and reduce significantly away from the interface 22. The top half of the waveguide 20 has very low stress in both the x and y directions.

Refractive Index

The refractive index of the waveguide 20 is affected by these stresses according to the following formulas:

$$n_x = n_0 - C_1 \sigma_{xx} - C_2 (\sigma_{yy} + \sigma_{zz})$$

$$n_y = n_0 - C_1 \sigma_{yy} - C_2 (\sigma_{xx} + \sigma_{zz})$$

where n_0 is the unstressed refractive index and C_1 and C_2 are the stress-optic (photoelastic) constants.

For silica:

$$n_0 = 1.4458;$$

$$C_1 = 0.756 \times 10^{-6} \text{ (MPa)}^{-1}; \text{ and}$$

$$C_2 = 4.181 \times 10^{-6} \text{ (MPa)}^{-1}$$

Stress-Induced Birefringence (Bs)

The stress-induced birefringence (Bs) is defined as:

$$Bs = n_x - n_y = (C_2 - C_1)(\sigma_{xx} - \sigma_{yy}).$$

So for silica:

$$Bs = 3.425 \times 10^{-6} (\sigma_{xx} - \sigma_{yy}).$$

The stress-induced birefringence (Bs) in waveguides causes Polarization Dependent Wavelength (PDW) shifts. Since the stresses σ_{xx} and σ_{yy} change the refractive index in the x and y directions, the wavelength, which is inversely proportional to the refractive index, will be different in the x and y directions. The wavelength shift, and thus the wave propagation constants, will depend upon the direction of polarization of the light. This polarization sensitivity is undesirable for many types of optical devices.

Plots of σ_{xx} , σ_{yy} and $\sigma_{xx} - \sigma_{yy}$ for Waveguide 20 at $x = 0$ and $x = 0.5 \times$ waveguide width, respectively - Figs. 5 and 6

Figs. 5 and 6 are plots of σ_{xx} , σ_{yy} and $(\sigma_{xx} - \sigma_{yy})$ through the thickness of the waveguide 20 going from top to bottom, at: the center (where $x = 0$); and at the edge (where $x = 0.5 \times$ waveguide width), respectively. There are regions of high

stress concentration (see Fig. 3) due to sharp corners where the stress cannot be calculated exactly. In practice, there will be some rounding at the corners due to the etching process of core layer 14 to form waveguide 20 so that the localized stress at the corners will be reduced. In finite element modeling, the stress value will be determined by the size of the elements at the corners. The maximum stress σ_{xx} in the waveguide 20 is about 500 MPa (compressive) and the maximum value of ($\sigma_{xx} - \sigma_{yy}$) is in excess of 300 MPa (compressive). The change in the refractive index and the birefringence (Bs) therefore is of the order of 10^{-3} which is significant.

The birefringence (Bs) and therefore the stresses σ_{xx} , σ_{yy} and σ_{zz} need to be an order of magnitude smaller for good optical performance.

The stress contours σ_{xx} , σ_{yy} illustrated in Figs. 3 and 4 show high stresses near the underclad-waveguide interface 22 which reduce rapidly away from the interface 22. In fact, stress gradients were found to exist up to a distance of about half the width of the waveguide 20, and beyond that the stresses are nearly zero.

Method of the Present Invention - Figs. 7 to 12

The inventors have discovered that by overetching the underclad layer 12 by just increasing the etch time when forming the waveguide 20' of the present invention, the stresses in the active part of the waveguide (core) 20' are

significantly reduced, thus improving the stress-induced birefringence and the polarization dependent loss.

Initial Structure - Fig. 1

The initial structure in the method of the present invention is also shown in Fig. 1 which is also the initial structure in the formation of the waveguide 20 formed by the inventors in conducting their stress modeling simulations. The approximate thicknesses and mechanical properties of the various layers 10, 12, 14 are the same as described hereabove and in Table I.

As shown in Fig. 1, substrate 10 having an underclad layer 12 formed thereupon and a core layer 14 formed upon the underclad layer 12. The thermal stresses in the layers described hereafter were calculated using Finite ElementTM simulations.

Substrate 10 is preferably comprised of silicon, silicon oxide, glass or GeAs and is more preferably silicon. Underclad layer 12 is preferably comprised of silica. Core layer/film 14 is preferably comprised of: silica; Ge doped silica; or B, P and Ge doped silica; and is more preferably silica.

Substrate 10 is preferably from about 0.20 to 1.50 mm thick and is more preferably about 1.00 mm thick. Underclad layer 12 is preferably from about 5.00 to 25.00 μm thick and is more preferably about 15.00 μm thick. Core layer 14 is

preferably from about 3.00 to 10.00 μm thick and is more preferably about 6.00 μm thick.

Formation of Waveguide 20'/Overetch of Underclad Layer 12 - Fig. 7

As shown in Fig. 7, core layer/film 14 is patterned, preferably by etching, to form waveguide 20' while overetching underclad layer 12 to form an overetched underclad layer 12' having a projection 15 under waveguide 20'.

The underclad layer 12 is preferably overetched from about 0.50 to 6.00 μm , more preferably from about 2.00 to 4.00 μm and most preferably about 3.00 μm . The amount by which underclad layer 12 is overetched relates to the width of waveguide 20' to be formed and is preferably about half of the width of the waveguide 20' ((i.e. about (0.5) \times (waveguide 20' width)). It may be greater although that would impact upon the process time and would reduce the benefit.

Modeling results show that the maximum benefit to the stress reduction is achieved at about one-half the waveguide width. At etch depths larger than about one-half the waveguide width, the stress is still being reduced although the gain to the performance is diminished. Additionally, the increased process time needed to etch greater than about one-half the waveguide width may have a negative impact.

Formation of Overclad Layer 26 - Fig. 8

As shown in Fig. 8, an overclad layer 26 is then formed over the waveguide 20' and the overetched underclad layer 12' to a thickness above the overetched underclad layer 12' of preferably from about 0.50 to 6.00 μm and more preferably from about 2.00 to 4.00 μm .

Overclad layer 26 is preferably comprised of a material that optically matches the underclad layer 12/overetched underclad layer 12' and is preferably comprised of silica, glass or GaAs and is more preferably silica.

The addition of overclad layer 26 will generally alter the stresses in the waveguide 20', however the overclad material is chosen to be very compliant so as not to have a significant effect upon the waveguide 20' stresses, so that the stress benefits of overetching underclad layer 12 are applicable with the use of overclad layer 26 as well.

Stress Contours of σ_{xx}' and σ_{yy}' in the Waveguide 20' and the Overetched Underclad Layer 12' - Figs. 9 and 10

For an overetch of 3 μm into underclad layer 12 with a waveguide 20' having a width of about 6 μm , Figs. 9 and 10 show stress contours σ_{xx}' and σ_{yy}' , respectively, for the waveguide 20' and the overetched underclad layer 12'. As

shown, the stress gradients exist only in the overetched underclad layer 12' with the core waveguide 20' being nearly stress-free.

The deeper the underclad layer 12 is overetched, and thus the thicker the underclad projection 15, the further removed the stress gradients will be from the active part of the waveguide 20'.

Plots of σ_{xx}' , σ_{yy}' and $\sigma_{xx}' - \sigma_{yy}'$ for a 3 μm Overetching into Underclad Layer 12 -
Figs. 11 and 12

For an overetch of 3 μm into underclad layer 12 with a waveguide 20' having a width of about 6 μm , Figs. 11 and 12 are plots of σ_{xx}' , σ_{yy}' and $(\sigma_{xx}' - \sigma_{yy}')$ through the thickness of the waveguide 20' going from top to bottom, at: the center (where $x = 0$) (3 μm overetch into underclad layer 12); and at the edge (where $x = 3 \mu\text{m}$) (3 μm overetch into underclad layer 12), respectively.

These plots show that the stress gradients are mostly shifted into the projection 15/overetched region of the overetched underclad layer 12' and that the stresses in the core wavelength 20' are nearly zero.

It is noted that the waveguide 20' made in accordance with the method of the present invention is stress-free in σ_{xx}' and σ_{yy}' only. The overetched underclad layer 12' would also remove the stress gradients in σ_{zz}' to make the

stress uniform but σ_{zz}' is non-zero. However, σ_{zz}' has no effect on polarization sensitivity and birefringence (Bs) (in accordance with the formula

$$Bs = n_x - n_y = (C_2 - C_1)(\sigma_{xx}' - \sigma_{yy}')$$
 disclosed above.

Advantages of the Present Invention

The advantages of one or more embodiments of the present invention include:

1. the stress-induced birefringence of the waveguide is reduced;
2. the polarization sensitivity of the waveguide is reduced;
3. the waveguide/overetched underclad layer is achieved by only increasing the etch time;
4. the waveguide/overetched underclad layer is achieved without any additional process steps;
5. the waveguide/overetched underclad layer is achieved without alteration of the materials employed in conventional waveguide formation processes; and
6. the waveguide is nearly stress-free.

While particular embodiments of the present invention have been illustrated and described, it is not intended to limit the invention, except as defined by the following claims.